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SUBJECT: WHAT'S NEXT FOR CHAVEZ

Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.4 (d)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Pending announcement of the official results of the appeals for the presidential recall referendum signatures, there are rumors and indications that President Hugo Chavez may be willing to accept a National Electoral Council (CNE) decision that results in a recall referendum. If so, the National Electoral Council would proceed to schedule a recall referendum. Alternatively, some believe the President may push for early elections, a move complicated by legalities and feasible only if political agreements can be reached. End Summary.

2. (C) President Hugo Chavez acknowledged publicly June 1 that the opposition, though "having engaged in some fraud," might have come up with sufficient valid signatures in the appeals process for the presidential recall referendum. They may be a winner "by a hair," the President said, "nothing more." Vice President Rangel followed the President's comments June 2, saying that if the National Electoral Council (CNE) determines that the opposition indeed has sufficient signatures, the GoV is prepared to go to the recall. Vice President Rangel's chief of staff, Rene Arreaza, told the ambassador June 2 that Chavez will/will accept the results of the appeals. Other GoV officials, such as Minister of Culture Jesse Chacon, and Fifth Republic Movement leader Elias Jaua, have echoed what appears to be Chavez line.

3. (C) National Assembly Secretary and Podemos deputy Eustoquio Contreras (protect) told DCM June 2 that Chavez and his top political advisers discussed all options, including the "hard line" of simply telling the CNE to rule against the Opposition which Chavez ruled out, at a late night meeting June 1. The outcome, however, was that Chavez was inclined to accept a CNE decision that would permit a referendum to go forward. The meeting participants, according to Contreras, acknowledged that the Comando Ayacucho had been excessively optimistic in assessing the Coordinadora's capabilities, and in its own ability to persuade people to withdraw their signatures. The Comando Ayacucho reportedly believed that the Coordinadora had obtained only some 80,000 signatures beyond the minimum required. Chavez and his advisors also discussed what next if Chavez lost the referendum. Arreaza told the Ambassador that there will be a series of meetings at Miraflores beginning June 4 in which they will decide if they go to the recall or move to early elections.

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Early Elections  
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4. (C) Aragua State Governor Didalco Bolivar told the Ambassador June 1 that he was seeking a meeting with the President to advise him that he should call early elections to attenuate the loss before the CNE announces the results. Other pundits and politics watchers have speculated that Chavez would make such a move to catch the opposition unprepared for an electoral contest. In a second conversation with Arreaza, the Chief of Staff reiterated that Chavez will accept the results; the question is whether to go to the recall or call general elections. The Political Committee (the cabinet, key MVR party members, and the key Chavista mayors and governors) are to discuss the options in Miraflores June 4. Arreaza also confirmed the assessment OAS SYG Cesar Gaviria had given the Ambassador earlier: that PDVSA President Ali Rodriguez and VP Rangel favor accepting the results while hard-liners such as Chacon, Libertador Mayor Freddy Bernal, and National Assembly Deputy Tarek Saab oppose.

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Obstacles  
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5. (C) The main obstacle to calling early elections,

however, is that there are currently no legal provisions for Chavez to call early elections, according to former Attorney General and law professor Ramon Escobar Salom. Early elections would require a constitutional amendment, an option the opposition discarded during the OAS talks in 2003 because, they say, former President Jimmy Carter backed the recall referendum solution and they did not believe they Chavez would agree to the idea. Under the Constitution, the President with the Council of Ministers can introduce an amendment which the CNE must then put up for ratification via a referendum within 30 days. The amendment requires approval by majority of voters to come into effect. Escobar told PolCouns June 1, however, that it is conceivable that Chavez could make a political deal to short cut the legalities of the Constitutional amendment path.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) The important news is that Chavez, for whatever reasons, appears to have decided to accept a referendum. He will continue to portray this, however, as the result of CD fraud, and GoV magnanimity. Medium term, the important news is that the GoV knows it has lost a big one, and is concerned it may lose even more. The combination of international observers, opposition organization and public opinion was critical, and will continue to be so in a referendum.  
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